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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 001887

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STATE FOR AF/W, INR/AA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/19/2028

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SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT SHUTS CHANNELS TV AFTER REPORT THAT  
YAR'ADUA WILL RESIGN

REF: A. DRL/EMBASSY SEPTEMBER 18 EMAIL

[1](#)B. ABUJA 1842

Classified By: Acting Political Counselor Geoffrey Martineau for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: On September 16, democracy in Nigeria took another step backward with the shutting down of the private broadcast outlet Channels TV after it reported that President Yar'adua may resign on health grounds after completing the upcoming reshuffle of his cabinet, which is now scheduled for September 25-27 (see refTel B). The administration wasted no time dispelling the President's resignation rumors, followed by deploying the State Security Service (SSS) to shut down one of Nigeria's major private TV stations and revoke its media license. While the allegations were untrue, the reports and the GON's reaction to them do reflect the growing anxiety over Yar'adua's health and leadership capacity in light of his recent trip to Saudi Arabia for medical treatment of serious ailments, which was clumsily disguised by the Government as a religious pilgrimage. Channels claimed it picked up a report from an email from the Nigerian News Agency (NAN), which operates under the Ministry of Information (MOI). It was later reported that the email did not originate from NAN, but from a false source using a NAN-like email address. MOI Minister John Odey personally accompanied the SSS agents to Channels headquarters. This action by the Government is extremely disturbing and falls way outside the bounds of any type of reasonable GON leadership and freedom of the press. This Gestapo-like action further adds to the atmosphere of unsteady leadership in Nigeria. Ambassador will raise the matter with the Foreign Minister this weekend. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (U) On the morning of September 16, several editors of Nigerian news media and print received an email from a "Newsagency of Nigeria", not to be confused with the official News Agency of Nigeria (NAN), announcing that "President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua may resign after cabinet reshuffle, on health ground" (sic). The local and international broadcast media quickly picked up the story. Channels Television, a Nigerian private television network, was one of the first media outlets to report the story. The official NAN quickly disowned the story, noting that the originating email address was not theirs, while the President's spokesman, Mr. Olusegun Adeniyi, stated that the rumors of Yar'Adua's resignation (which later proved not to be from the real NAN) were "absolutely rubbish" and blamed it on "those who do not wish Nigeria well." A few hours later, Channels had also aired a

retraction of the story.

¶3. (C) Despite the retraction, the GON's Minister of Information and Communication, John Odey, and an SSS detail immediately closed down Channels Television, took away its operating license, and detained Channels Abuja Bureau Chief Bash Adigun, Controller of News Ambrose Okoh, General Manager Steve Judo, Station Manager Sola Alaiya, and State House Correspondent Chukwuma Onuegwusi. The NAN Deputy Editor-in-chief was also reportedly detained for questioning after SSS operatives rushed NAN headquarters. The chairman and owner of Channels, John Momoh, who was out of the country at the time, asserted that the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) was responsible for revoking Channels' operating license, which according to post sources, was to preempt any perception of SSS authority over media regulation. Momoh also told the press upon his arrival September 17 at the Lagos airport that the remaining journalists in custody would soon be released. Recent Perm Sec in Ministry of Information (protect) told Acting DCM September 18 that Momoh personally delivered a letter of apology to President Yar'Adua and to the Ministry of Information. The former Perm Sec called the actions by Minister Odey and the SSS an overreaction, saying that if the station did something wrong then the GON should have made recourse to the courts, rather than summarily closing the station.

¶4. (U) On September 18, Channels Television issued a press statement in the print media, asserting that its offices were "invaded by men of the State Security Service, the first

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occurrence in its 15 years of existence." Channels explained that the source of the story was bogus, but they thought at the time it was from the official NAN, and reiterated "its commitment to ensuring a lasting democracy in Nigeria." Three of the detained journalists were released September 18, while the remainder are expected to be released soon. Nigeria Guild of Editors President, Gbenga Adefaye, expressed his dismay, telling the press that he was "shocked" about the media shutdown and that "no medium of public communication should be shut down on account of alleged infraction." Numerous other members of Nigeria's outspoken and colorful press corps also issued opinion pieces criticizing the Government's move against the channel.

¶5. (C) COMMENT: The Gestapo-like reaction by the Yar'adua Administration to shut down a media outlet over a misrepresentation of events underscores the political tension in the atmospherics in Nigeria. The Nigerian media is well-known not only for less-than-factual stories, but also hyperbole. The reaction of the government shows in this instance just how worried it is about concerns over President Yar'Adua's health and leadership, coupled with the looming cabinet reshuffle. Although we already know this to be certain, the GON also has not announced publicly whether Yar'adua would appear at the UNGA next week (he reportedly will stay back to preside over changes in his cabinet, but health reasons are likely a key part of that decision). We know that many ministers are anxious about their own immediate futures, including Director General for the SSS, Afas Gadzana, who was recommended for his job by Babagana Kingibe, the recently dismissed Secretary to the Government of the Federation. While the SSS media shutdown may have been nothing more than either Gadzana's or Odey's attempting to reassure Yar'adua of their loyalty and keep their jobs, the overwhelming attention paid to what started as a small "newsflash" email reflects a larger anxiety over the future of Yar'Adua's administration, his health, and his leadership. Nigeria is very much in flux right now and all modicum of normal behavior--even for Nigeria--has certainly gone out of the window. The Ambassador will raise the matter with the Foreign Minister over the weekend. END COMMENT.  
SANDERS